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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003426

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SUBJECT: UNCOVERING THE DJ KIDNAPPING: CLOSING THE DOOR ON
AN AUTHORITARIAN PAST

REF: A. SEOUL 003287

[1](#)B. SEOUL 003224

Classified By: POL Joseph Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The life of former President Kim Dae-jung, often referred to as Asia's Nelson Mandela, is a microcosm of the turbulent course of post-war Korean politics. Beginning in the 1960s, Kim, a native of the historically repressed Jeolla region, became a vocal pro-democracy activist and repeatedly ran in presidential elections against the ruling junta, for which he was persecuted, jailed and, in 1973, kidnapped by Korean intelligence agents on foreign soil. On October 24, an investigative committee of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) confirmed longstanding suspicions that then-president Park Chung-hee, at a minimum, "tacitly approved" and was "indirectly involved" in the kidnapping plot. The NIS committee findings regarding the kidnapping and other incidents previously shrouded in ambiguity hold important ramifications, especially during this presidential election season, for a nation leaving behind an authoritarian past and looking ahead to a democratic future. End Summary

ACCOUNTING FOR PAST WRONGS

[1](#)2. (C) On October 24, the Development Committee for Clarifying the Past of the NIS announced its finding that former president Park Chung-hee "tacitly approved" of the 1973 kidnapping of then-opposition leader Kim Dae-jung in Tokyo. However, the Committee failed to definitively conclude that the ultimate objective of the kidnapping was to murder Kim Dae-jung, as he and others have maintained. The Committee's report also stated that "the government should officially apologize to the victim Kim for threatening his life and infringing upon his human rights and restore his honor."

[1](#)3. (C) The investigative committee was established in November 2004 to investigate seven major incidents allegedly involving NIS' predecessor Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). The committee revealed many of the intelligence agency's past misdeeds including the Inhyeokdang incident, in which eight alleged communist conspirators were unjustly executed. The Committee also concluded that the bombing of Korean Air (KAL) flight 858 over Burma in 1987 was committed solely by North Korean agents, without KCIA involvement.

During this era, the national intelligence agency served as the arm of despotism for the authoritarian regimes, often carrying out targeted attacks against political rivals and dissident groups.

¶4. (C) At a November 23 presentation to poloffs, Soongsil University professor and political commentator Kang Won-taek described the 2007 presidential election as signifying the "normalization" of Korean politics. According to Kang, Presidents Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun focused on rectifying the abuses of the Park Chung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo authoritarian regimes, which had held power for over thirty years, and laying the foundation for an egalitarian democracy. The last three administrations worked to overturn the "sacred cows" and legacies of the Park Chung-hee regime: regional discrimination, military authority, and the often illicit relationship between the government and the chaebol industry groups. To illustrate, the last 15 years saw the arrests of former Presidents Chung Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo on charges of embezzlement, the removal of a secret military cabal that had run the country since Park Chung-hee's coup d'etat in 1961, inclusion of natives from the Jeolla region into all levels of government and significant reform in the business world. Disclosing the facts, at least in part, behind the 1973 kidnapping of Kim Dae-jung seems to be the latest chapter in the Korean nation's coming to grips with its authoritarian past.

DJ: FROM VICTIM TO VICTOR

¶5. (C) Running on a pro-democracy and anti-dictatorship platform, Kim Dae-jung lost the 1971 presidential election to incumbent Park Chung-hee by 970,000 votes. Many Koreans

believe that Kim would have won the presidency had the election been fair, free and transparent. Soon thereafter, Kim Dae-jung almost fell victim to an assassination attempt disguised as a car accident, which left him with a permanent hip injury. Fearing for his life, Kim fled to Japan to continue his political activities abroad. On August 8, 1973, or five days before the establishment of an anti-Park organization of overseas Koreans in Tokyo, KCIA agents kidnapped him. After intervention from foreign governments, especially the USG, Kim was brought back to Seoul and released near his residence after five days of confinement, after which he was placed under house arrest.

¶6. (C) After years of arrests, thwarted assassination attempts and failed presidential campaigns, Kim Dae-jung was elected president in 1997, marking Korea's first ever peaceful transfer of power to an opposition group. In the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis, Kim rolled back many of Park Chung-hee's legacies. During Kim's presidency, previously ostracized Jeolla natives became prominent in both public and private sectors, economic reform was initiated and the "Sunshine Policy" thawed Cold War North-South relations, ultimately netting Kim the Nobel Peace Prize.

¶7. (C) Kim Dae-jung, through his spokesman, has openly criticized the Committee report for not acknowledging Park's direct involvement in or an assassination motive behind the kidnapping plot. Kim has claimed for years that, in the days following the kidnapping, his captors took him out to sea in a small boat and placed concrete weights around his legs, intending to throw him overboard. According to Kim, only direct intervention from an overhead CIA helicopter saved him from drowning on that fateful day. On November 23, Kim's secretary Park Jun-hee told poloffs that he was disappointed

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by the inconclusiveness of the committee findings and "wants the whole truth to come out" for personal, not political, reasons. Kim Dae-jung has also stated that he has waited 34 years for the entire truth to be publicly disclosed and will continue to wait until that day.

RAMIFICATIONS FOR JAPAN-ROK RELATIONS

¶18. (C) In the absence of an official inquiry, both the ROK and Japanese governments have danced around the kidnapping incident for years. Immediately following the kidnapping in 1973, the Park regime formally denied any involvement and dispatched Prime Minister Kim Jong-pil to placate Tokyo. Although the KCIA's involvement was widely suspected, the Japanese government ended its official investigation into the matter after diplomatic "settlements" between the two governments in 1973 and 1975. Senior advisor Ha Tae-yun told emboffs that Kim Dae-jung was outraged that the Japanese government had not conducted a "proper investigation" into the matter and wanted an official apology from the Japanese. Cold War concerns, mutual economic interests and an awkward bilateral relationship stemming from the Japanese occupation likely prompted this political compromise from Japan.

¶19. (C) By openly admitting the KCIA's role in the kidnapping, the ROK also conceded to infringing upon the sovereignty of Japan, the scene of the crime. Soon after the release of the NIS report, the Japanese Foreign Ministry demanded that the ROK offer a formal apology. However, to the Japanese government's consternation, the ROK government merely expressed its "thoughts of regret" for the incident, rather than an outright apology.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) There was speculation, particularly in the Japanese media, that the Roh administration timed the announcement to hurt Lee Myung-bak, the presidential candidate of the opposition Grand National Party. However, the NIS committee report revealed only foregone conclusions; most people had already assumed that the KCIA and Park Chung-hee were behind Kim's kidnapping. Ultimately, this announcement is unlikely to have any effect on the Korean electorate, who are more concerned with improving the economy than digging up the past.

VERSHBOW